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# THEOLOGY AND INSANITY.

BY JOHN H. GIRDNER, M.D.

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A **SHORT** time ago the Bishop of Rochester delivered a lecture to the students of St. Thomas' Hospital, London, on the subject of religion and insanity. The bishop was at great pains to combat and disprove the popular idea that religion is, or has been in the past, one of the principal exciting causes of insanity. He declared, among other things, that "religion is a force which makes for sanity."

Everyone who has had experience in the care and treatment of the insane, and who is familiar with the history of this branch of medical science, will agree with the bishop that the true religion of kindness, sympathy and love, as taught by Christ, is a powerful force, which makes always for mental peace and sanity. The beautiful and simple accounts in the New Testament of the so-called casting out of devils, illustrate the power by which Jesus of Nazareth soothed perturbed minds by His presence, and quelled outbursts of disordered brains by His words.

There is, however, as the bishop intimates, an opinion abroad that religion has in some way been an important factor in dethroning human reason; and the expressions, "religious mania" and "religious insanity" are met with sufficiently often throughout all literature to justify the prevalence of this idea. But a careful study of the history of mental diseases amply proves that not the religion of Christ, but the theologies of man, have caused so many minds to give way and develop settled delusions and hallucinations of a so-called religious type. The Christian religion has been charged with producing insanity, because of the very common mistake of confounding the two very dissimilar terms, viz., religion and theology.

The doctrine of diabolical agency in mental diseases is to be

found in all the sacred literatures of the Orient, especially in Persian theology, where the idea is most fully developed; and, as taught by the heathen nations around them, it had its full effect on the Jewish writers. Hence, we find it firmly established in the Old Testament. The same theory of direct Satanic influence or possession passed on into the New Testament.

The miracles of healing which were performed by the Master and His Apostles, seem to indicate that it was the custom to diagnose those cases of disease which presented no pathological changes in the body appreciable by the senses as cases of possession by one or more devils, or evil spirits or unclean spirits; and the act of restoring them to health was viewed as a casting out of these spirits. In this group was naturally included most diseases of the brain and of the nervous system; for these are either functional—that is, they have no morbid anatomy at all—or the changes are only to be detected after death and by microscopic examination.

On the other hand, those cases whose diseases could be diagnosed by the symptoms they presented, or by the pathological changes in some portion of the body that were apparent to the senses, were said to be sick, the diagnosis was given by simply naming the disease, and the act of restoration to health in such cases was called healing. Luke was a physician, and presumably knew more about the nature of the diseases of those who applied to the Master and His disciples than any of the twelve. The first miracle of healing recorded in the Gospel by Luke is the case of the leper.

**"Behold a man full of leprosy; who, seeing Jesus, fell on his face, and besought Him, saying, 'Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.'**

**"And He put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, 'I will: be thou clean.' And immediately the leprosy departed from him."\***

Luke diagnoses this case as leprosy, a common disease in Palestine, and one with which we are familiar in these days. The account of this miracle emphasizes the influence which the doctrines and theories of the Old Testament had upon the New. Moses taught that leprosy was uncleanness, and, according to his law, lepers were unclean persons and had to reside outside the camp of Israel. The Mosaic classification of leprosy is accepted by the patient, in this case, for he asks to be made clean. And the

\* Luke, v., 12-13.

Saviour Himself seems to fall into the custom, for He says: "I will; be thou clean." In other places in the New Testament leprosy is referred to as a spirit of uncleanness.

The second miracle of healing recorded by Luke is more directly applicable to our subject.

"And, behold, men brought in a bed a man which was taken with a palsy; and they sought means to bring him in, and to lay him before Him.

"And when they could not find by what way they might bring him in because of the multitude, they went upon the house top, and let him down through the tiling with his couch into the midst before Jesus."\*

After some discussion with those present, Jesus said to the patient with palsy: "Arise, and take up thy couch, and go unto thine house." And the man did as he was told. Here we have the diagnosis of palsy. Now palsy is paralysis, complete or partial, of some portion of the muscular system, due always to disease or injury of the brain or nervous system. In this case the disease or injury to the brain or nervous system was of such a nature and location that it affected only the nerves of motion, and rendered it impossible for the man to walk. This was not a case of possession by a devil or evil spirit; it was a simple case of palsy, as all could see. Suppose the disease or injury to the brain or nervous system had been of such a character, or so located, as to have caused convulsions or mental derangement, without any physical signs which Luke could see with his naked eye; by all precedent, his case would have been regarded as one of possession by devils or evil spirits, and his restoration by the Master would have been recorded as the casting out of these devils.

Again, we read in the fourteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel of a man who came to Jesus, "who had the dropsy" "and he took him and healed him." To say a man has dropsy conveys little information of his condition, as dropsy is only a symptom and may be caused by a number of diseased conditions. And so we might continue accumulating facts showing how little accurate information is to be obtained from the Gospels of the ailments of those who were restored to mental and physical health by the Saviour while he dwelt among men in the flesh.

The Apostolic Church firmly believed that all forms of insanity, epilepsy, hysteria and catalepsy were not diseases at all,

\* Luke, v., 18-19.

but cases in which the devil or his imps had taken possession of the individual, with or without the individual's consent. And their bodies having become a tabernacle for the devil, they were ostracised by society and the church. Not only were these unfortunates who suffered from mental and nervous diseases ostracised, but the church went further, and attempted to cast out the indwelling demon by all manner of physical punishment and tortures.

As theology became more firmly established and supported by governmental power, "the possessed" were more and more severely dealt with; and the doctrine that cruelty to madmen was punishment of the devil dwelling within, became more widely disseminated and believed. Nor did any relief come to these unfortunates as a result of the Reformation. Martin Luther, Calvin, and the other leaders of the new theology were, if anything, more pronounced in their persecution of these "devils incarnate" than the Church of Rome had been.

No effectual check was put to the theological doctrine of diabolical possession of the insane and those suffering from kindred diseases of the nervous system, until about the middle of the eighteenth century. A declaration was passed by the Parliament of Paris in 1768 that possessed persons were to be considered as simply diseased. And as the power of the governments of Christian nations was withdrawn from the support and enforcement of the theological doctrine of diabolical possession, medical science, enlightened by the spirit of truth, gradually demonstrated, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that insanity and all such affections were the result of natural diseases or injuries of the brain and nervous system, and that persons so afflicted were entitled to the same treatment as though they suffered from disease of the heart, lungs, or any other organ of the physical body.

But the battle for the insane was not yet won. It is true that theology retired from the field, tacitly at least admitting the error of its former position.

But mystery and superstition still surrounded the insane. They were no longer exorcised and punished as devils, but their misfortunes now took the form of neglect. An insane person was far from being considered a simply sick person by his friends and the public generally.

As time passed, public and private charities became more numerous and more lavish in their expenditures for the establishment of hospitals and infirmaries for the care and treatment of the poor suffering from every kind of disease, except those diseases of the brain known as insanity. From the time when the theory of diabolical possession ceased to hold sway, up to within the past few decades, the destitute insane were as a rule turned over to the tender mercies of the county jailer. They were imprisoned in filthy cells, often in chains, and in the matter of food and general attention treated far worse than if they had been wild beasts. This was not the universal custom, for very soon after insanity was admitted to be a disease some states and nations provided asylums for their pauper insane. But even these were far from what they should have been or what lunatic asylums are to-day. Indeed, the history of insanity during this period furnishes chapters of neglect and cruelty almost as shocking as are to be found in the annals of the period when the theological doctrine of diabolical possession prevailed.

Insanity is now recognized as a disease which is the result of some functional or organic disturbance of the brain, or of some injury or malformation of that organ. Be it said to the everlasting credit of medical science that it has rescued the whole subject of the diseases of the brain and nervous system from the region of myth and superstition, and placed it on a scientific plane along with the other diseases and injuries to which human flesh is heir. The old lunatic asylums, and the filthy cells of the county jails with all their horrors, where the victims of dethroned reason used to be confined and tortured, have been abolished, and in their place we now have the modern hospital for the insane. And it stands on the same footing in every respect as a hospital for diseases of the eye and ear, or any other medical specialty. It was not the churches, but medical science, inspired by a desire to benefit mankind, which taught the world that the insane are our brothers still, and that to them is due the same Christian charity and care as to any others in distress.

The evil effects of the doctrine of diabolical possession did not end in cruelty to those already insane. The horror and fear of becoming possessed which it roused in the minds of the sane, could not fail to make it a potent cause of insanity. Fear of disease always weakens the power of resisting it.

There were also other dogmas in the creeds of the various Christian denominations which were very far from tending toward mental serenity and to internal peace. In the centuries gone by, when men's minds were dominated by theological creeds, when such doctrines as predestination, eternal punishment, sins that were unpardonable, were preached and enforced, if need be, by fire and sword, it is no wonder that the prevailing form of insanity was of the spiritual type. The retreats and asylums for insane up to a comparatively recent date contained many inmates possessed of settled delusions which were the result of fear and of brooding over the welfare of their souls here and hereafter in the light of the theological doctrines then preached and enforced. Many imagined that they had committed the unpardonable sin, and that the Spirit had ceased to strive with them, and that they were thus hopelessly doomed to eternal damnation. Others imagined that they were predestined from birth to eternal punishment. Others again had hallucinations of sight and hearing, and could see Satan and his imps actually in the flesh, in daily attendance upon them, restraining each Christian act, and stifling each prayer for deliverance; and at night they were kept awake by the conversations of evil spirits. These are only a few specimens of the kind of imaginings which possessed the minds of those who were said to be "crazy on religion," but who were as a matter of fact insane as a result of theology. Let it be repeated; it was never the sweet Gospel of peace and forgiveness taught by the Saviour which dethroned reason, but the creeds and dogmas of men. William Cowper, the poet, is a signal example of so-called religious insanity. Under the tutelage of the Rev. John Newton, his life became an almost endless round of devotional exercises and brooding over theological questions which finally dethroned his reason. His delusion was that he had been rejected of heaven; he ceased to pray and discontinued all religious exercises as one hopelessly doomed. The eminent divine, Mr. Newton, with deplorable consistency treated Cowper's disease as a diabolical visitation and abstained from calling in a physician. If this impressionable poet could have accepted the Gospel of peace and love, taught by the Saviour, and discarded the theology of the Rev. John Newton, there is reason to believe that history would not have to record the name of this brilliant genius

in the list of those who fell victims to the so-called religious insanity of that time.

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that mental diseases have decreased as a result of comparative freedom from the theological thralldom of the past. Freedom of thought in matters of religion has changed the character of the delusions and hallucinations of the insane. Insanity keeps pace with the changes in human development, and the character of the delusions and hallucinations of the insane at any time is a reflex of the interests which are then uppermost in men's minds. We now seldom find the spiritual type of insanity among the inmates of hospitals for the insane. As doctrinal discussions have ceased to interest the masses, theology has ceased to be a cause of insanity. This is an age of material development, of making things and having things. Men are much concerned with the problem of amassing treasure here; that, with the long line of social questions which belong to it, is now uppermost in their minds, and these material problems are the ones pressing hardest for solution. Hence it is that the prevailing character of the delusions and hallucinations of the insane are now of a material type.

The struggle for existence, modern inventions, steam and electricity, and the mad rush for wealth, result in ever increasing demands upon the brain and nervous system. And under this strain, many who have congenital or acquired defective nervous organizations become insane, just as the same class formerly did as a result of fear and brooding over theological problems.

The insane are not now tormented by the devil and his imps, but telephones and phonographs are continually ringing in their ears. Others suppose they have steam engines in their heads, and many imagine they are persecuted by men of large fortunes or of great political power. Formerly those who were afflicted with delusions of grandeur were prone to imagine themselves to be the Saviour of the world, or the Virgin Mary or some eminent saint. Now they are more apt to think themselves to be great inventors or powerful politicians, or the possessors of untold wealth. As already intimated, the delusions of the insane always take their form and color from the questions and problems which are most absorbing at the time.

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